"To speak is to link together lost times and spaces": Trauma in Elena Ferrante's *Troubling Love*

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Mr. Morale
Before I go in fast asleep
Love me for me
I bare my soul and now we're free

Kendrick Lamar, *Mother I Sober*

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Abstract

Elena Ferrante's novel *Troubling Love* intertwines a narrative tapestry that explores the complexities of trauma and its enduring impact on individuals. This thesis examines the multifaceted manifestations of trauma within the novel, delving into the interplay between memory, identity, and silence. Through close textual analysis, this paper illuminates how Ferrante employs narrative techniques and character dynamics to depict the profound and often unsettling effects of trauma on both individual and collective levels. Drawing on literary and psychological trauma theory, this research investigates how Ferrante's portrayal of trauma challenges conventional narratives and unveils the complexity of trauma. By engaging with themes of violence, motherhood, and self-discovery, this thesis offers an understanding of trauma as a pervasive force that shapes the lives of the characters. Ultimately, this study contributes to the ongoing discourse on trauma literature and highlights the enduring relevance of Ferrante's work in exploring the complexities of traumatic human experiences.

Table of Contents

Introduction....1
Chapter 1: Experiences of trauma....7
    Violence....8
    Mother and Daughter Relationship....15
    Dissociation/Disconnection....25
Chapter 2: Narration of trauma....28
    Absence....29
    Indirection....32
    Repetition....36
Conclusion....48
Bibliography....51
Vita....54

Introduction

In the realm of contemporary literature, few names resonate with as much intrigue and acclaim as that of Elena Ferrante. The enigmatic Italian author shrouded in anonymity, has captivated readers worldwide with her profound storytelling and sophisticated characterizations of women's lives. From the labyrinthine streets of Naples to the depths of the human mind, Ferrante's works are a testament to the power of literature to illuminate the complexities of ordinary lives. At the heart of Ferrante's writing lies an exploration of identity, both individual and collective. Through her vividly drawn characters and expressive prose, she navigates the intricacies of human relationships, the struggles of womanhood and motherhood, and the dynamics of power and privilege.

This thesis seeks to delve into the rich tapestry of Elena Ferrante's first novel *Troubling Love (*1992). My research was born from a desire to understand a book that for me is complicated, not only because it deals with a sensitive topic - domestic violence - but also because of its narrative techniques and troubled characters. With a non-linear narration - full of flashbacks, sensations, and images, a dissociative narrator, a deafening silence from a mysterious mother figure, and a troubled relationship between mother and daughter, *Troubling Love* is a thriller that turns into a bildungsroman, as Gianni Turchetta (1992)[1] perfectly described. After her mother Amalia's death under mysterious circumstances, Delia, the narrator, returns to the violent Naples of her childhood, to retrace her mother's last steps. However, what she will find out is much more than that; without knowing, her journey is also in search of herself.

[1] Turchetta, Gianni. "Un piccolo inferno e un amore molesto", *L'Unità*, 29 June 1992, pp. 16.

The story is told entirely by the first person protagonist, Delia and it begins with the unsettling news of Amalia's death, Delia's mother: "My mother drowned on the night of May 23rd, my birthday, in the sea at a place called Spaccavento, a few miles from Minturno" (11). The body was found wearing only an expensive bra, an odd detail for someone who used to be a poor seamstress. As Delia dives deeper into the investigation, she encounters various enigmatic characters and stumbles upon her mother's secret life, which includes disturbing revelations about Amalia's relationships and experiences. The journey not only leads Delia to new insights about her mother but also forces her to confront her own troubled childhood, damaged by an oppressive father and a strained family dynamic. Some characters that will appear in the course of Delia's narrative are her grumpy uncle Filippo, Amalia's brother; the enigmatic and womanizer Caserta, Amalia's supposedly affair, friend, and once neighbor; Caserta's son, Antonio, who used to be Delia's childhood friend; Delia's pathologically jealous and violent father who is also a mediocre and frustrated painter; and Signora De Riso, a widowed neighbor.

Right after Amalia's funeral and at her mother's house, Delia receives a phone call from Caserta. The man wants Amalia's bag of dirty clothes in exchange for a suitcase with new clothes, from the same brand of bra Amalia was wearing when she drowned. Delia becomes intrigued by this mysterious man who was probably with Amalia before she died, so, with the help of her uncle Filippo, she tracks Caserta down in the city of her childhood. The only clue Delia has to find Caserta is the store where the clothes were bought, The Vossi sisters shop, arriving there, she finds not Caserta but his son Antonio, who's the manager of the place.

As the narrative goes, we notice that Delia is not well. The woman keeps having memories and flashbacks of the violence she witnessed as a child and flashbacks of her mother's

encounters with Caserta in the cellar of Caserta's father *pasticceria*. Throughout the story, the line between reality and Delia's perception becomes increasingly blurred, creating a dense, psychological exploration of memory, identity, and maternal bonds.

I start from the assumption that *Troubling Love* is a difficult text, an opinion shared with others as well. Stiliana Milkova, writing for The Iowa Review [2], calls *Troubling Love* a "difficult text, yet hard to put down". Describing a love scene, when Delia has sex with a friend from childhood, Milkova says: "Ferrante uses a detached, almost clinical tone to describe one of Delia's sexual experiences, making the scene both compelling and repulsive." David Lipsky, in a review for The New York Times[3], describes the same scene:

> "Sex with a childhood friend proves spectacularly unsuccessful: "My compliance without participation began to disorient him. ... I was afraid I would throw up." The man finishes "without a moan, as if he were feeling no pleasure."

Furthermore, Lipsky calls Ferrante a "nose writer", bringing our attention to the scenes involving Delia's senses: an odor of ammonia in the city bus; flowers with a putrid aroma etc. Using the scene where Delia feels as if she had left herself somewhere and was no longer able to find herself, Lipsky says that Ferrante is "fascinated by the moments when a personality - like a wire stretched too far from its power source - shorts and corrodes."

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[2] Milkova, Stiliana. "Elena Ferrante's TROUBLING LOVE | the Iowa Review." *Iowareview.org*, 2012, iowareview.org/blog/elena-ferrantes-troubling-love. Accessed 6 Apr. 2024.

[3] Lipsky, David . "Troubling Love - by Elena Ferrante - Books - Review." *The New York Times*, 2006, www.nytimes.com/2006/10/01/books/review/Lipsky.t.html. Accessed 6 Apr. 2024.

Milkova and Lipsky are both drawn to moments in the novel that seem disturbing, off-putting, or inexplicable. However, they don't acknowledge the role that trauma has in the book, so scenes like the sex one are just "compelling and repulsive", the odors present in various scenes are there because Ferrante is a "nose writer", the scene where Delia feels lost, as if she had left herself somewhere is just because her personality "shorts and corrodes", because she is a person lost in life. This thesis then seeks to give a deeper meaning to those scenes by acknowledging and describing the ways in which scenes like this record responses to trauma: dissociation, loss of identity, and PTSD flashbacks. If we acknowledge the pervasive effect of trauma in the novel and put *Troubling Love* in conversation with trauma theory, we find out that the smell descriptions in the book are part of vivid flashbacks that Delia has because she grew up witnessing violence and is therefore traumatized by it. Delia seems detached when having sex with her childhood friend because she is a woman traumatized by the sexual violence that took place in childhood. Ultimately, what I propose in this thesis is that to make more sense, to become less blurred, the book needs to be read using trauma theory. If read superficially, *Troubling Love* becomes just a confusing and difficult reading and we miss the complex testimony of lives altered by a traumatic past.

By examining the novel through a trauma lens, encompassing literary theory about trauma as well as psychological theory, I argue that what at first sight is seen as a confused narrative that jumps forward and backward in time, followed by detailed descriptions of past events, are actually flashbacks experienced by a narrator that is, at all times, triggered by the familiar environment of her childhood. What appears to be a mysterious and dubious mom, is actually someone unable to talk due to trauma's power to silence victims that trauma has. A complicated relationship between mother and daughter is also, importantly, a relationship

changed and weakened by violence. We can better understand Ferrante's characters and the novel by reading them through the lens of trauma studies; the reader then will gain new insight into the minds of mothers and daughters when we interpret them as individuals traumatized by different forms of violence. My thesis is organized around stylistic features of the novel that cannot be fully understood in the absence of some understanding of the workings of trauma. I will explore Delia's back-and-forth narrative, the relationship between mother and daughter, Delia's identity, Amalia's silence, and Delia's dissociation, as well as show the multiple forms of violence within the story to explain why the characters behave the way they do. Some questions I raise are: How does Ferrante conceptualize trauma in *Troubling Love*? What effects of trauma can be seen in the characters of the novel? What role does the setting of Naples play in shaping the traumatic experiences of the characters? In what ways does Ferrante's narrative style and structure reflect the psychological impact of trauma on her characters? How do gender and socioeconomic status intersect with experiences of trauma in Ferrante's novels?

In tracing the intricate shapes of Delia's journey, I hope to illuminate the broader implications of Ferrante's work for our understanding of trauma narratives and the ways in which literature serves as a powerful tool for engaging with the complexities of traumatic human experiences. As we embark on this exploration, we are reminded of the enduring power of storytelling to confront the darkest moments of someone's life and illuminate the path toward healing and redemption. Last but not least, I hope to bring attention to aspects of Ferrante's work that continue in her later works such as *The Days of Abandonment* (2002), *The Lost Daughter* (2006), and *The Neapolitan Novels* (2012, 2013, 2014, 2015), to mention a few of which are texts that feature a distant relationship between mother and daughter and how violence shape the lives of those affected by it.

My thesis is divided into two chapters, in “Chapter 1: Experiences of Trauma”, I start by defining trauma as a medical term to describe emotional wounds left on the mind by painful events, and then I give a brief overview of the origins of trauma theory as a medical term and then go on to differentiate a traumatic event from an unpleasant one. Lastly, I delve deeper into the ways in which characters experience trauma in *Troubling Love*. In “Chapter 2: Narration of trauma”, I explore literary trauma theory, showing why the literary text is an excellent medium to narrate painful experiences. Ultimately, I explore the ways in which trauma appears in Ferrante’s narrative: through indirection, absence, and repetition. In the conclusion, I answer questions that I proposed in this introduction, and then I put *Troubling Love* into conversation with Ferrante’s literature.

Chapter 1: Experiences of trauma

Trauma is the greek word for "wound". It originally referred to a physical injury requiring medical treatment (Davis and Meretoja 1) [4]. However, the term is now used to describe emotional wounds, "traces left on the mind by catastrophic, painful events." (1). Trauma's wound is psychological and it is caused by "tragic events or severe distress" (1). According to Davis and Meretoja, trauma theory in the form we know today grows out of the medical and legal concerns of the nineteenth-century industrial revolution. Railway accidents aid in the development of trauma theory because the new industrial machinery of the time sometimes broke causing accidents and leaving people distressed despite not producing any visible injury. (2)

Then the First World War came and psychoanalysts were confronted with soldiers returning from the trenches alive but psychically injured: "It came to be seen as a form of lasting injury on the mind caused by a shocking event that tended to elude recall and representation" (Davis and Meretoja 2). Only after the Second World War and after Holocaust that trauma became a recognized category in psychology to explain psychic injury. In 1980 the term PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder) was recognized by the American Psychiatric Association, the term was used to explain the distress of US veterans after the Vietnam War (3).

By this time, besides being a medical and psychological term, trauma also became a category of social discourse. Studying trauma in language involves recognizing "how a painful past can resurface in the present, often through indirect symptoms, silences and repetitive patterns of thought and affect" (Davis and Meretoja 2). Language is powerful and it can be used to explain suffering but it can also be used as a resource to claim rights for those who were hurt.

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[4] Davis, Colin, and Hanna Meretoja. "Introduction to Literary Trauma Studies." *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma*, edited by Colin Davis and Hanna Meretoja, Routledge, 2020, pp. 1–8.

By exploring trauma narratives, we make sure that past injustice is remembered to not be committed again but also, we identify and articulate the effect of trauma which had been mysterious or hidden.

What needs to happen in order for trauma to occur? What distinguishes a bad, unpleasant experience from a traumatic one? According to Herman (1992) [5] "unlike commonplace misfortunes, traumatic events generally involve threats to life or bodily integrity, or a close personal encounter with violence and death" (34). For example, being taken by surprise, trapped, exposed to the point of exhaustion increases the chances to form a traumatic experience as well as events that includes physical violation or injury and exposure to extreme violence (34).

Violence

The characters of *Troubling Love* experience a range of traumatic events, all of which are violent in their nature: Amalia suffers domestic violence, Delia witness domestic violence and also suffer sexual violence. Those events harm the characters of Amalia and Delia specifically but there is also the general presence of gender-based violence that threatens women in general. In *Troubling Love,* each character falls victim of one kind of violence, whether because you are a woman, whether because you are a wife and whether because you're a vulnerable child. Laura Brown (1995) [6] explains that in 1995, the definition of a traumatic event, according to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM III-R)* was that "the person has experienced an event that is outside the range of normal human experience" (Brown 100). She problematizes this definition saying that some experiences women go through everyday such as incest and rape are so common that they are not outside the range of normal human experience but they still need to

[5] Herman, Judith. *Trauma and Recovery: Aftermath of Violence from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. New York, Basic Books, 1992.

[6] Brown, Laura S. "Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma." *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, edited by Cathy Caruth, The John Hopkins University Press, 1995, pp. 100-112.

be considered traumatic. Brown brings our attention to the fact that many traumatic experiences in women's lives occur in secret: “they are experiences to which woman accommodate; potentials for which women make room in their lives and their psyches” (101), they happen “behind the closed doors of marital relationships” (101) where husbands beat and sometimes rape their wives, they happen in the backseat of a car, when a man forces his girlfriend into sex etc. (101). The violence Amalia suffers happens at home but also in public. In *Troubling Love*, violence is so normalized and common that when it happens around other people, no one does a thing to stop it. Neapolitan women suffer in silence and in public.

As stated by Nicoletta Mandolini (2016) [7] violence is one aspect of Ferrante’s production that impact the author’s literary discourse (272). But more than that, Ferrante often links the theme of violence with the city of Naples (272). In this sense, *Troubling Love* is no different. Here, violence is a “specific gender-related practice that functions as a tool for the maintenance of a patriarchal hierarchy of domination” (272). In the bus on her way to the Vossi Sister’s shop, Delia observes women, trying to protect themselves from men, standing in the bus with an “unnatural rigidity” (52), but men don’t give up, they play “silent games” with them: “One stared ironically at a dark-haired girl to see if she would lower her gaze”, another one “with his eyes, caught a bit of lace between two buttons of a blouse” (52). These silent games evoke a memory in Delia, of when she used to ride the bus with her mother, and, if the bus was crowded, she felt responsible for protecting her mother from men, the way her father did when he was on the bus. When in the company of her father, Amalia would get slapped only because he thought another man had touched her.

A well-known character harasses a young woman on the bus, proving one more time how

[7] Mandolini, Nicoletta. “Telling the Abuse: A Feminist-Psychoanalytic Reading of Gender Violence, Repressed Memory, and Female Subjectivity in Elena Ferrante’s Troubling Love.” *The Works of Elena Ferrante: Reconfiguring the Margins*, edited by Grace Russo Bullaro and Stephanie V. Love, New York, Springer Nature, 2016, pp. 271-292

men have the power to play with a woman's body against her will. At first sight, Caserta is peacefully standing behind a twentyish-year-old girl, with a newspaper on his hands: "he seemed a peaceful old man in dignified old age, intent on reading a newspaper gray from the rain" (70). Nonetheless, soon Delia notices that as the bus moves and turns, he gets closer and closer to the woman's body even though there is enough space behind him: "Now his back was arched, his legs were slightly spread, his stomach leaned against her buttocks. There was nothing that justified that contact" (70). The girl becomes bothered and tries to push her body forward, however, Caserta regains his position: "But even when the girl turned with barely concealed rage and then pushed her way forward to escape him, the old man didn't desist. He waited a few seconds before regaining a few inches he had lost" (70). The girl elbows him in the ribs but that is not enough, in fact, instead of taking distance, he presses his stomach against her with even greater determination: "He received a timid elbow in the ribs but continued impassively to pretend to read, and in fact pressed his stomach against her with greater determination" (70).

A city like Naples is not a safe place for a woman as harassment comes in many forms, in the bus, as you walk on the streets. Delia remembers that her mother used to tell stories about how she was followed by men as she walked on the streets, some men touched her hair and shoulder, others tried to take her hand while making obscene gestures. She could only keep her eyes down and walk fast. Amalia met her own husband because he chased her on the street. "Amalia told us that, hearing him behind her, she was frightened" (109). Delia recalls a scene from childhood in which her mother told some friends that Caserta had pushed her into a corner and tried to kiss her (35).

Amalia was a poor woman, with three daughters, an abusive husband and no one to lean on, not even her brother. We see small samples of violence expressed in the words of uncle Filippo. According to him, even when Amalia finally left her husband, she was wrong in doing so. Amalia should have never "abandoned" (44) Delia's father despite had seen inumerous times, his own sister, "battered by slaps, punches and kicks" (47): "Amalia, he began to shout, never

thinks of the consequences ahead of time: she was always like that, she should have sat down and reflected and waited; instead she woke up one morning and left the house alog with you three girls. She shouldn't have done it [...] (44). Delia, on the contrary, hates to hear her uncle complaining about Amalia, in fact, she says that she always had trouble accepting that uncle Filippo defended her father and blamed her mother. When Delia tells her father that she saw Caserta and Amalia together at the cellar, her father beats Caserta with the help of Filippo. But Amalia couldn't find support in women as well, her longtime neighbor, Signora De Riso, is another voice that joined the choir of those saying that Amalia was not to be trusted.

Amalia's economic status intersect with experiences of trauma in the novel. She comes from a working-class background, with economic hardship that aggravate her vulnerability to trauma and limits her access to resources and support systems. Socio-economic inequality also affects Amalia's ability to cope with trauma, as she struggle with financial instability, lack of access to mental health care, and the stress of trying to make ends meet while dealing with her emotional wounds. Only when Delia and her sisters grew up that Amalia can finally take initiative to divorce from her husband. Maybe because her daughters are already adults, and they help her to survive with a small amount of money every month.

Delia's father jealousy was so intense that Amalia had to be vigilant with what she wore: "Amalia, who had always dressed shabily because she was poor but also because she was in the habit of not making herself attractive - a habit acquired many decades earlier to placate the jealousy of my father [...]" (28). For example, Amalia couldn't wear a bikini, she had to wear a sturdy high-necked green bodysuit, intended to smother shapes, and she often had to check her bodysuit to make sure that the fabric wasn't riding up on her body. Amalia lived a life of restraint, her husband couldn't bear hearing her laugh, so much that "whenever there was a stranger in the house [...], he warned her: Don't laugh" (99). And then Delia reflects that it must have been difficult for Amalia to find the "appropriate laugh, the voice, the gestures that her husband could tolerate, you never knew what was all right, what wasn't" (99). Amalia's husband

used to beat her until she bleed. Delia recalls a scene when she watched her mother cleaning up her face in front of the mirror: “I was telling myself about the blood. In the bathroom sink. It dripped from Amalia’s nose, thick, without stopping, and first it was red, then, when it touched the water from the tap, faded. It was also on her arm, up to the elbow. She tried to stanch it with one hand but it flowed out from under the palm” (100).

When Amalia was outside with her husband, he would watch her like a predator watch its prey “he protected her from other men violently, but whether it was a violence that would crush only rivals or would be turned against himself, fatally I never knew” (54), in the bus, for example, he kept an eye on men and once he was certain that a man in the bus had touched Amalia, he would slap her, in front of everyone, in front of their daughters. Delia says: “I was sure that he would kill the man, and I didn’t understand why instead, he hit her” (54). Delia remembers a scene form childhood, when, at the beach, during the family’s vacation, the same would happen, he would protect Amalia from any contact with other men: when male beachgoers approached Amalia’s umbrella when playing, her husband would call all the daughters and demand for them to stay together. At the beach, Amalia would pretend she was cold so she could stay on a chair, wrapped in a towel, under the umbrella, beside her husband. But Delia knows her mother wasn’t cold. Later in the novel when Delia has her mother’s clothes and among them, a man’s shirt that she wants to get rid of, she goes to uncle Filippo’s house to offer him the piece of clothing. However, her uncle’s response is a further reminder of her father’s violence: “If you really want to see your father, at least don’t tell him about this shirt. Even today for a thing like that he would kill your mother” (51). Amalia is dead but she is still not free of her husband’s violence. His violence follows beyond the grave. Delia learns later from Signora De Riso that Amalia was still being watched by her husband even after the separation. The neighbor reveals that Amalia’s ex-husband came to her house insistently asking if she noticed Amalia doing reckless things. This was a few months before Amalia’s death. Significantly, De Riso doesn’t see Amalia’s husband as the violent man he is, but as a “poor, kind

and desolate man" (99) that even after being separated after two decades, still loved Amalia and still cared about her. Signora De Riso is compliant to this violence in the form of surveillance, despite being part of the same gender man oppresses.

Amalia's husband made her life a living hell because Caserta used to bother all the woman in the neighborhood and he suspected that she was having an affair with him. At some point, flowers, fruits, a book of poetry, *sfogliatelle* and a dress were delivered in the house, Amalia didn't know who sent the things. But it didn't matter because her husband destroyed everything. Delia's father would try to destroy Amalia as well, but "he always managed to stop a step from stupidity" (100). Once, out of sudden, after a discussion, Delia's father hit Amalia twice in the face, she tried to run away but was caught and kicked: "One blow struck her in the hip and hurled her against the armoire of the bedroom. [...] He caught her, grabbed her by the hair, pounded her head against the mirror of the armoire, which broke" (113).

The most violent scene in the novel takes place after Delia tells her father that she saw Caserta and Delia together at the cellar. At this, her father and uncle Filippo beat Caserta, but, they beat Amalia first: "First of all he chased Amalia along the corridor, down the stairs, through the street" (93). Then when Amalia was finally caught she was "punched, slapped, kicked in the side" (93). He brought her home bleeding and then continued the violence: "as soon as she tried to speak, he struck her again. I looked at her for a long time, bruised and dirty" (93). Then, Delia's father and uncle Filippo go find Caserta: "Caserta lived on the top floor but first they caught him on the third [...] Caserta had been pushed down the stairs and had rolled to the first floor. At the bottom of the stairs he got up and ran up again" (94). Delia's father get him again and finally "threw him to the floor. He pulled his head up by the air and smashed it against the bannister. Finally, he left him unconscious, in the blood on the floor". People try to pull Delia's father away, otherwise he would kill Caserta: "Filippo took my father by one arm and dragged him away calmly [...]. Caserta's wife too, was pulling my father away. [...] Of Amalia there remained only her voice, which said: "Don't kill him, he hasn't done anything" (93).

Throughout the narrative, Delia never mention her father beating her or her sisters, it seems that Amalia was the only physical victim of his violence, however the only time Delia has an encounter with her father in the course of the book is almost in the end, and the encounter is - as expected - a violent one. The old man at first doesn't recognize his own daughter, Delia is now at the house she used to live as a child, the violence come with words and acts, the father calls Delia a "whore, like your mother" (116) and then punches her. But the utmost act of violence comes when Delia calls her uncle Filippo and he tells her that he talked to Caserta and they agreed that there was no more reasons to fight, "Amalia was dead, life had moved on" (106). In the end, all the men that hurt Amalia in multiple and irreversible ways establish a friedly relation.

Troubling Love is hard-to-digest due to all the violence it contains. Delia's mother was beaten constantly in the course of her marriage with Delia's father. Beaten for smiling to strangers, beaten for getting too close to a man, beaten for allowing a stranger to approach her. The question that remains is, how Amalia was able to go through so much pain in the course of her life? At a point in the narration, Amalia's brother, known as uncle Filippo answers. He says that Amalia and him grew up with their mother saying that any pain shall pass: "Our mother had taught us to blow on the hurt and say: it will pass" (63). Once, when Amalia was working, she pricked herself badly with a needle, the sewing machine pierced her index finger and came out on the other side. Still, the only thing Amalia did was stop the pedal, get the needle out, bandage her finger, and go back to work. "I never saw her sad" 63) Uncle Filippo adds.

Delia was traumatized twice, not only she witnessed her mother suffering violence but she also falls victim to another kind of violence, the sexual one. Delia was sexually abused by Caserta's father. The man was the owner of the neighborhood *pasticceria*. In the cellar, he used to make all the goods he sold in the store and it was in this place that Delia was abused. Delia describes as if the abuse was not an abuse but a play between her mother and Caserta, so the subject of every description is not her but her mother, it is not Caserta's father but Caserta, but in reality, everything happened to Delia:

> "I was surely Amalia when, one day, I found the pasticceria empty and the little door open. I was Amalia, who, naked as the Gypsy painted by my father, [...] slipped into the dark cellar with Caserta. [...] But Caserta, stooping at the bottom of the three steps beyond the door, looked at me obliquely and said, "Come"" (131).

She continues, describing in detail how Caserta's father touched her inappropriately: "he ran a knotty finger, dirty with cream, lightly up one leg, under the dress my mother had sewed for me. At the touch I felt pleasure" (131). While Caserta's father touches her, he mumbles obscene things to Delia: "I was breathless. I felt pleasure and fear at the same time" (132).

Mother and Daughter Relationship

As I have shown trauma is a pervasive force in the novel. Trauma shapes and distorts the lives of Amalia and Delia and it impacts the relationship between them as well. One of the key textual clues of this difficulty is the pervasive silence between mother and daughter. Since she was a kid, Delia would hear things *about* her mother, but never *from* her mother. To Delia's father, uncle and even to Signora De Riso, Amalia was someone not to trust, suspicious, someone that liked to get attention from men and someone that gladly accepted the gifts of Caserta and had an affair with him. Not even when Delia's father grabbed Amalia by the neck, do we hear words from her, she would simply explains to her daughters: "He's like that. He doesn't know what he's doing and I don't know what to tell him" (48). There is an uncertainty surrounding the figure of Amalia, which translates to Delia's lack of trust in her mother. I want to explore this relationship, showing some features of it, and as we will notice, all features exist because of silence. According to Pederson (2018) [8] silence is a symptom of trauma (107) so if we start from the assumption that silence is directly linked to trauma, we can see how the relationship between Amalia and Delia has been poisoned by violence. Because of trauma, the

[8] Pederson, Joshua. "Trauma and Narrative." *Trauma and Literature*, edited by J. Roger Kurtz, Cambridge University Press, 2018, pp. 97–109.

two of them never developed an intimate relationship. The mother and daughter relationship is marked by estrangement, jealousy, uncertainty, a fear of Amalia disappearing, Delia's constant attempt to distance herself from her mother and hate for the mother.

Troubles in the relationship between mother and daughter are evident from the beginning of the narrative. Delia describes the times when her mother came to her house in Rome, and how her mother annoyed her: "She woke at dawn and, as her habit, cleaned the kitchen and living room from top to bottom. I tried to go back to sleep, but couldn't: rigid between the sheets, I had the impression that as she bustled around she transformed my body into that of a wizened child." (11). We notice that Amalia bothers her daughter because the sounds of her cleaning turn Delia into a child again. All the cleaning is in vain since when Amalia goes back to Naples, Delia untidies the house her mother had tidied and tidies everything to her own taste now. By doing so, slowly, the daughter can fade the smell of the mother's passage in the house, a smell that gives her a sense of "restlessness" (12). Delia shows resistance against her mother's way. While visiting her daughter in Rome, Amalia also tried to be friends with her daughter's friends, tellig them stories of her own life. She talked to people, shopkeepers, that in years the daughter had only exchanged a few words with. She walked in the city with casual acquaintances. We learn that those are things that annoy the daughter because she says, with her mother, she could only be "self-contained and insincere" (11). Amalia's sociability irritates Delia.

From the beginning of the book, then, it is clear that Delia considers her mother a nuisance. During her mother's funeral, Delia's sisters are crying disconsolately, but Delia is not. In fact, she thinks that now that her mother is dead at least she has no longer any obligation to worry about her (15). What's more, this thought signals that the relationship between mother and daughter is one based on obligation. It seems that Delia never took care of Amalia because she loved for her mother or because she saw her mother as a human being deserving of care, but she took care of Amalia because that's what you are supposed to do for an elderly parent. Since Amalia took care of Delia when she was a child and made sacrifices for her upbringing, now

Delia has to pay it back. This obligation is a burden. Amalia is not seen beyond her role as a mother and with her mother, Delia has a duty. Even metaphorically, Amalia is a burden. In her strolls throughout the city to solve bureaucratic issues concerning Amalia's death, Delia feels her mother's dead body growing "heavier and heavier" (16). In the funeral, Delia helps to carry the casket, however, "I was afraid during the entire journey that the wooden box might slide into me [...] along with the body it contained" (16-17). The weight of Amalia's body can crush her.

We learn that Delia doesn't have a close relationship with her other two sisters. So Delia is not only estranged from her mother but also from her sisters. The only thing they have in common is a past that they don't like (20). Silence reins in their relationship: "The rare times we met we preferred to be silent about all the things we had to say to each other" (20). After the funeral, the sisters embrace each other and after that, each one goes to their own way, they promise to see each other again soon but Delia knows this won't happen, "at most we would exchange phone calls, to measure the increasing rate of mutual estrangement" (27). After everyone leaves from the funeral, Delia is forgotten on the street, no relative offers her a place to stay, not even her uncle Filippo - Amalia's brother - offers her a place to stay.

I want to draw attention to the fact that Delia is forgotten on the street. This signals for me, a deeper issue that the narrator seems to have, a loneliness that seems to permeate the narrator's life. She lives alone in Rome, and she is distant from her sisters, with her mother, who now is dead, there was never an intimacy. She barely knows the relatives she sees at her mother's funeral, they were only seen in childhood if ever. Her whole self-discovery journey in Naples is also mostly a solitary one. Friends are mentioned in the story, but they are friends from Rome, friends from the life she built for herself, distant from her origins. She doesn't like her past so she made "a clean break with all my relatives" (47). Starting from the assumption that trauma informs Delia's life and actions, I believe that this loneliness can be attributed to a deeper issue

that Judith Herman (1992) [9] talks about: “Traumatic events call into question basic human relationships” they “breach the attachments of family, friendship, love, and community” (Herman 51).

When the mother tries to establish intimacy with Delia by taking care of her and her house or with Delia's acquaintances, the daughter feels annoyed, because she herself cannot or doesn’t want to offer this kind of intimacy with her mother or her acquaintances. She cannot be her true self when in the presence of her mother, and it seems, not even in the presence of other people. In a scene months before Amalia’s death, we have a confirmation that between them, there was never intimacy. When visiting her mother, Delia brings Amalia to the empty floor in her mother’s building, a place where Delia used to go as an adolescent everytime she was unhappy. Delia doesn’t know why she did it, since the empty floor was a secret place for her, but she believes she did so to try to establish an intimacy that there had never been. Then, Delia asks Amalia a question that has been echoing forever: “Have you, in all these years, had a man?” (23). Her mother answers, without unease: no. But Delia doesn’t believe it. She doesn’t believe or she doesn’t have the courage to believe since for the first time ever, Delia had the courage to ask Amalia something about her life. Hearing her mother’s answer is scary: “I had always known it. There was a line that I couldn’t cross when I thought of Amalia. Perhaps I was there in order to cross it. That frightened me” (25).

Although Amalia is an annoying obligation for Delia, she worries about her mother, she used to worry as a child and she still worries as an adult. Sometimes, when going back from Rome, Amalia missed the train, usually, arriving on the next one or sometimes the next day. But Delia couldn’t get used to it so she would always get worried. “I had always pictured a weft of traps, woven purposely to make her vanish from the world” (12). As a child, everytime Amalia

[9] Herman, Judith Lewis. Trauma and Recovery: Aftermath of Violence from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror. New York, Basic Books, 1992.

left the house, Delia would wait for her impatiently in the kitchen, at the window. Is she was late, her anxiety worsened to the point of giving her tremors. Then, she used to do something to relieve her feelings:

> I ran to a storeroom, without windows or light, right next to her and my father's room. I closed the door and sat in the silent dark, crying. The little room was an effective antidote. It inspired a terror that kept at bay my anxiety for the fate of my mother. In the pitch-blackness, suffocating because of the smell of DDT, I was attacked by colored shapes that grazed the pupils of my eyes for a few seconds and left me grasping. "When you get back I'll kill you." I thought, as if it were she who had left me shut up in there. But then, as soon as I heard her voice in the hall, I quickly slipped out and went to hover near her, with an air of indifference. That storeroom came to my mind when I discovered that she had left at the normal time but had never arrived. (Ferrante 12-13)

The "storeroom, without windows or light," serves as a potent symbol for Delia's psychological state. The darkness of the room mirrors her despair and isolation, highlighting the sense of being emotionally and physically cut off from others, particularly the maternal figure. Ferrante uses images full of senses to evoke the narrator's internal experience. The absence of light in the storeroom symbolizes a lack of clarity and understanding, while the oppressive smell of DDT adds a layer of suffocation, suggesting the toxicity of the environment, both literal and metaphorical. The "colored shapes" that attack the protagonist might represent intrusive thoughts or overwhelming emotions, which are only momentarily held "at bay" by the terror of the room itself. This suggests that even the child's refuge is full off its own horrors, a lesser evil compared to the anxiety for her mother's fate.

This passage also uncover some aspects of the mother and daughter relationship: Delia has almost an anxious attachment for her mother, her fear of abandonment is intense. However, when Amalia comes back home, instead of hugging her and expressing her worry, she just

pretend nothing happened with an “air of indifference”. Delia has been insincere to her mother since she was a kid. She never showed her true feelings, and as we will notice as the story goes, Amalia also never showed her true feelings, so Delia learned to be contained with her mother. When it comes to the fear of abandonment. I believe this intense fear can be explained better if we look into Delia’s past. Delia grew up in an immensely violent place. Her father used to beat her mother constantly, in front of everyone, in front of his daughters. When in company of her father, Delia is in constant fear, note:

> He ordered Amalia not to leave the umbrella. He watched her to see if she glanced at them out of the corners of her eyes. When the boys came too close to the umbrella in the course of their games, laughing, and sandy up to their hair, he quickly joined us and compelled us all four to stay near him. Meanwhile with fierce looks he declared war on the youths. We, as always, were afraid (Ferrante 137-138)

> We, his daughters, were ashamed of him and believed that he might hurt us as he threatened to do to anyone who touched our mother. When he was on the tram, too, we were afraid. In particular, he kept an eye on short, dark, curly-haired men, with thick lips. He attributed to that anthropological type a desire to steal Amalia’s body [...] Once he was certain that a man in the crowd had touched her. In front of everyone he slapped her: in front of us. (Ferrante 54)

These passages are rich in emotional tension. The narrator notes, "We, as always, were afraid," indicating that this sort of incident is not isolated, but part of a larger pattern of behavior that regularly instills fear in the children. This fear is varied: fear of the youths, fear of the paternal figure’s reactions.The paternal figure exhibits a strong desire for control, emphasized by his order for Amalia not to leave the umbrella - a symbol of shelter and protection but in this case, first and foremost, of confinement. His surveillance of Amalia, checking to see if she glances at "them" (the boys), reflects a protective yet possessive look that seeks to monitor and

regulate her interactions.The paternal figure's actions are not merely protective but aggressive; he "declared war on the youths" with "fierce looks." This militaristic imagery suggests a perception of the outside world, particularly the realm of the youths, as hostile. This not only reinforces his protective instinct but also an adversarial worldview that he imposes on the children, influencing their perception of social interactions as inherently antagonistic.

The father's fixation on a specific "anthropological type" as a perceived threat reveals his own prejudices and insecurities, projecting into these men a "desire to steal Amalia's body." This irrational attribution highlights the father's possessive and objectifying view of his wife, treating her more as a possession under threat than as an individual. The father's behavior is emblematic of toxic masculinity - where control over women's bodies is mantained through violence and intimidation. His actions are rooted in a misogyny that views women as property and objects of possession. This passage examines the damaging effects of control on the psychological well-being of family members, especially children who are direct witnesses to such acts.

The climax of the passage is the public act of violence - slapping Amalia "in front of everyone." This is not just an act of aggression towards his wife but also an assertion of control, performed publicly to reinforce his dominance and authority. The inclusion of "in front of us," referring to the daughters, emphasizes the psychological violence inflicted on them as witnesses. This act serves to instill fear, not just in the immediate victim, Amalia, but also in the people around, especially his daughters, further settling their fear of him and their shame for him.

But these passages also uncover an aspect of the mother and daughter relationship. The fear of her father translates into fear for the disappearance of her mother. Since Delia's father is violent, she is afraid that if her mother disappears, she will have to live alone with a father that she doesn't like and that terrifies her. Also, this fear of her mother disappearing makes Delia develop a jealousy for her mother. When alone and in public with her Amalia, Delia feels the need to protect her from contact with people, just like her father does. Otherwise, someone can

take Amalia away and Delia "would be left alone with my angry father" (53). Amalia and Delia used to take the tram, if the vehicle was crowded, Delia was "possessed by a mania" to protect her mother from contact with man: "I placed myself like a shield behind her, crucified myself to her legs, my forehead against her buttocks, arms outstretched, one hand tight on the iron support of the seat on the right, the other on that of the left" (53).

Almost every interaction between mother and daughter was touched by violence. At home, Delia's father violence was constant, outside, there is the violence of the city. Delia narrates the journeys in the funicular with her mother, only the two of them. When the tram wasn't crowded, the trip was pleasant, Amalia picked Delia up so she could play with the handles. If the tram was crowded, then, Delia couldn't enjoy the trip or her mother's company because she felt the need to protect her mother from contact with men, just like her father did in the same situation. Here, we notice how harmful violence is to the relationship between Amalia and Delia.

We can also note jealousy in the feeling of possession coming from Delia. When Amalia was a child, the needle of a sewing-machine pierced her finger, leaving a bad scar. "My mother's wounded finger, pierced by the needle before she was ten, was more familiar to me than my own fingers precisely because of that detail. It was purple, and the nail appeared to sink into the crescent. For a long time I'd wanted to lick it and suck it, more than her nipples" (63-4). This finger was an embodiment of all the differences between mother and daughter. Differences that made Amalia "unreachable, and all together turned her into a being desired by the external world at least as much I desired her" (64). Delia's finger had no scar but she wanted to make a hole in her finger too, to make Amalia see that it was risky to deny Delia what she didn't have (64), to make Amalia see that "anything in her that had not been conceded to me I wanted to eliminate from her body" (64).

Throughout all the book, Delia attempts to distance herself from her mother because her

mother is linked to a violent Naples and a violent past. However, those attempts are made by someone that could never properly attach to Amalia because she offered nothing of her:

> It had happened after years in which, out of hatred, out of fear, I had wanted to eliminate every root I had in her, even the deepest: her gestures, the inflections of her voice, her way of taking a glass or drinking from a cup, her method of putting on a skirt, as if it were a dress, the arrangement of the objects in her kitchen, in her drawers, how she did her most intimate washing, her taste in food, her dislikes, her enthusiasms, and the language, the city, the rhythms of her breath. All of it remade, so that I could become me and detach myself from her (64)

Delia is aware that, from her mother's body, she carried almost nothing. She calls "I" the forced flight from a woman's body and that being so, she is no "I", she is confused, because she carried nothing of Amalia. Only now she is discovering things about herself, nevertheless, she doesn't know if this horrifies her or gives her pleasure. Delia tries so hard to distance herself from her mother that by the end of the book, she confess that she lost all the reasons to resemble her: "I was to such an extent determined to become different from her that, one by one, I lost the reasons for resembling her" (139).

Even though Delia never attached to her mother, they have an unavoidable link simply because they are mother and daughter, no matter how Delia tries to deny it in order to forget about her past. According to uncle Filippo, they even resemble each other: "of the three of you, you look most like Amalia" (43). In several scenes, Delia's and Amalia's identity merge. When Delia shows Amalia's identification card in the Vossi Sister's shop, the employee laugh at her and she doesn't understand why, only later, she finds out: in the identification card, someone hardened the features of Amalia's face in a way that resembles Delia. "The woman in the photograph wasn't Amalia: it was me" (61). After this, when Amalia looks at herself in the mirror, she can't help but notice that she has a face that had been adapted from Amalia's. Delia

feels her mother's ancestral presence in her: "I had Amalia under my skin, like a hot liquid that had been injected into me at some unknown time" (86). In the end of the book, Delia recognizes that they are both the same, her mother is dead but she is the continuation of her mother: "Amalia had been. I was Amalia" (139).

With her silence, Amalia offered nothing of her. "Amalia had the unpredictability of a splinter" (124) Delia says. However, I firmly believe that Amalia was silent not because she wanted to but because she was someone living a traumatizing life. The biggest mystery concerning Amalia is whether she had an affair, and this poisoned everything else because it created for Delia an image of her mother as a mysterious gypsy, just like the ones her father painted. As Culbertson (1995) [10] argues, survivors oftentimes, become silent about their victimization because talking about it is so intense as living it again (169). Also, they are afraid people won't believe them or simply because they cannot make the leap to words (169).

Along with silence, estrangement, jealousy, uncertainty, fear of Amalia's disappearance and attempts to gain distance from her, Delia also feels hate for her mother. This is not an uncommon feeling when we talk about mothering among violence. McDonald Harker (2020) [11] discloses how violence does not only produce hate for the perpetrators but also for the victim due to a lack of response from the latter and how harmful violence is to the relationship between mother and daughter:

> In recent years, mothers who are victims of domestic violence are one group of mothers who have become especially criticized, stigmatized, and vilified for mothering outside

[10] Culbertson, Roberta. "Embodied Memory, Transcendence, and Telling: Recounting Trauma, Re-Establishing the Self." *New Literary History*, vol. 26, no. 1, 1995, pp. 169–95. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/20057274. Accessed 26 Apr. 2024.

[11] McDonald-Harker, Caroline. "Abused Women's Mothering Experiences." *The Routledge Companion to Motherhood*, edited by Lynn Hallstein et al., London and New York, Routledge, 2020, pp. 255–265.

> the socially constructed boundaries of "good mothering" because they have lived in circumstances of abuse. Despite being the victims, abused mothers are often perceived and characterized as "bad mothers" because their ability to shelter, care for, protect, and provide a safe and secure environment for their children is called into question and deemed deficient, regardless of whether their children have witnessed or experienced abuse themselves (256).

Delia doesn't see her mother's lack of proper response to her father's agressions ("he's like that. He doesn't know what he's doing and I don't know what to tell him") as an in inability to speak, but as an act of justification, and for that, Delia and her sisters hate their mother:

> We, on the other hand, thought that our father, because of everything he did to her, should leave the house one morning and be burned to death or crushed or drowned. We thought it and hated her, because she was the linchpin of these thoughts. About this we had no doubts and I had not forgotten it (48).

Delia's narrative is very self-centered. In the course of the book we don't hear from Amalia or from Delia's sisters even though they grew up in the same violent environment. The excerpt above is the only time that Delia includes her sisters in her narrative. So not only Amalia hates her mother but also her sisters hate her mother, and Delia is sure of that. The only time when the sisters are included in Delia's narrative is to hate their mother.

Dissociation/Disconnection

Pierre Janet, a French psychologist and physician, was the person responsible for uncovering a key feature of psychological trauma: dissociation (Van der Kolk, Weisaeth and Van

der Hart 53) [12]. Dissociation occurs when the mind detach from an event that is so violent and shocking that it cannot be integrated into consciousness (Sutterlin 13)[13]. One sympton of dissociation is depersonalization, the experience of looking on from the outside. Van der Kolk and Van der Hart (1995) [14] talk about when in 1936, Freud revisited the concept of dissociation to say that "Depersonalization leads us to the extraordinary condition of double consciousness, which is more correctly described as split personality [...]" (166). The authors also say that "people who have learned to cope with stress by dissociation often continue to do so in response to the smallest strain" (164). When it comes to the narrative, "disruption, fragmentation, dissociation, reticence and repetitive troping" are strategies that comply with recognized symptoms of traumatic disorders (Kurvet-Kaosaar 311). [15]

It is common in the book to see Delia dissociating. The first time this happens is right after recalling the a scene from before Amalia's death, when Delia brought her mother to the empty floor of the building and asked her "have you ever, in all these years, had a man?". After this memory, Delia has the impression that she is being "spied on" (24), not being spied by someone else but by herself, "by me coming out on the landing to see myself sitting there" (24). It is almost a out-of-body experience, she's seeing herself from the outside of her own body. The second time Delia dissociates is similar the first one, she feels "as if I had left myself somewhere and was no longer able to find myself"(62).

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[12] van der Kolk, B. A., et al. "History of Trauma in Psychiatry." *Traumatic Stress: The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body, and Society*, by Bessel A. van der Kolk et al., New York, Guilford Press, 1996, pp. 47–76.

[13] Sutterlin, Nicole A. "History of Trauma Theory." *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma*, by Colin Davis, edited by Hanna Meretoja, Routledge, 2020, pp. 11–22.

[14] van der Kolk, Bessel, and Onno van der Hart. "The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma." *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, by Cathy Caruth, The John Hopkins University Press, 1995, pp. 158–182.

[15] Kurvet-Kaosaar, Leena. "Trauma and Life-Writing." *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma*, edited by Colin Davis and Hanna Meretoja, Routledge, 2020, pp. 305-316.

When Delia is in a hotel room waiting for her childhood friend Antonio to arrive, she dissociates again while having a shower. Again, she feels split off from herself, that's exactly what she says: "I was separated from myself: the woman who wanted to be shot off like an arrow, eyes wide open, was observed dispassionately by the woman under the water" (86). Delia also feels that she is about to fall down, to fragment, when in her father's apartment. She feels "precariously balanced on a sliver of the floor, of the house of forty years before: it could still support my father, his easel, the bedroom, but I was afraid that my weight would cause it to collapse" (12). Right after her mother's funeral, when she is walking through the streets of Naples, she feels the city "coming apart in the heat" (17). Again, a dissolution of what is stable. A fragmentation.

There is also scenes where Delia is not in control of herself. She dissociates and does things that she can't explain later. Scenes like this are explained by Herman (1992) [16]: "traumatized people feel and act as though their nervous system have been disconnected from the present" (34) and that "traumatic symptoms have a tendency to become disconnected from their source and to take a life of their own" (35). After the phone call where Amalia says "a series of obscene expressions in dialect (Ferrante 13) and causes in Delia "a disorienting regression" (13), Delia calls a police friend to help her decide what to do about her mother's weird calls. When her friend picks up the call, Delia surprises him "with a confused mixture of Italian and expressions in dialect" (14). She surprises him because she is not used to speaking the dialect, a language that evokes violence to her. She is caught by surprise again when walking on the streets of Naples, when a man comes to harass her, grabbing her by one arm and laughing, saying, in dialect: "What's the rush? Let me dry you off!" (67). Delia answers, "shouting, to her own amazement, insults in dialect" (67).

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[16] Herman, Judith. *Trauma and Recovery: Aftermath of Violence from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. New York, Basic Books, 1992.

Chapter 2: Narration of trauma

Language is a powerful tool when it comes to expressing trauma. According to Pederson (2018) [17], "the history of the relationship between trauma and narrative is almost as old as the history of trauma itself" (97). The stories people tell about painful experiences, both individual or collective, can be pivotal tools for recovery. But more specifically, literature can be a tool for recovery, Geoffrey Hartman (1995) [18] says that literature can help survivors to "read the wound" (537) of trauma and this is due to literature's imaginative feature: "Literature, however, can imagine - and can thus anticipate or envision traumas history cannot" (Pederson 99). In a similar vein, La Capra (2001) [19] says that the fictional aspect of literature distances the need to reproduce facts, making it useful to represent trauma:

> One might argue that narratives in fiction may [. . . provide] insight into phenomena such as slavery or the Holocaust, by offering a reading of a process or period, or by giving at least a plausible 'feel' for experience and emotion which may be difficult to arrive at through restricted documentary methods. (13-14)

One last aspect that makes literature a suitable tool for narrating traumatic experiences is because trauma and language are formally similar in their delayed quality: "trauma, as understood by psychologists like Judith Herman, Bessel van der Kolk, and even Freud, hits the human psyche with such force that it delays (or even disables) the mind's ability to access

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[17] Pederson, Joshua. "Trauma and Narrative." *Trauma and Literature*, edited by J. Roger Kurtz, Cambridge University Press, 2018, pp. 97–109.

[18] Hartman, Geoffrey H. "On Traumatic Knowledge and Literary Studies." *New Literary History*, vol. 26, no. 3, 1995, pp. 537–63. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/20057300. Accessed 23 Apr. 2024.

[19] La Capra, Dominick. *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001.

memories of the event" (Pederson 100)[20]. In a similar way, considering the link between signifier and referent from poststructuralism, Pederson, quoting Caruth (1996) says that reference is indirect, we may not have access to our own references much less those of others. Pederson simplifies it "For poststructuralists, there is a break between word and world; for trauma theorists, there is a break between word and wound" (100).

After establishing why, it is important to understand how. What are the marks that trauma leaves in a text? "For the most significant trauma theorists of the 90s - Hartman, Felman, Caruth, and LaCapra - the answer to this question often returns to three tropes: absence, indirection, and repetition" (Pederson 100-101). Delia's narrative in *Troubling Love* has the presence of all these attributes: Amalia is absent from the text as well as Delia's sisters [21]; by imagining her mother in scenes at the cellar and using the metaphor of candies, Delia communicates her abuse to us but indirectly; through flashbacks, Delia relieves all the violence she witnessed as a child.

Absence

Pederson writes: "Sometimes, trauma marks narrative with gaps and silence" (102) [22]. In *Troubling Love*, there are a lot of silence. The book is told from the perspective of the first person narrator Delia only, even in contact with other people from her traumatic past, we don't hear from them. We hear exclusively from Delia. We don't hear from Amalia, we don't hear from Delia's sisters and we don't hear from Antonio. They all witnessed or suffered from violence but neither of them offer Delia their point of view, they are all silent about their victimization. Delia never asks them directly about the past, but this is because she is silent about the past as well. There are a lot of victims but they never talk to each other because none of them

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[20] Pederson, Joshua. "Trauma and Narrative." *Trauma and Literature*, edited by J. Roger Kurtz, Cambridge University Press, 2018, pp. 97–109.
[21] I talk about this silence in the "mother and daughter relationship" section as well.
[22] Pederson, Joshua. "Trauma and Narrative." *Trauma and Literature*, edited by J. Roger Kurtz, Cambridge University Press, 2018, pp. 97–109.

has the words to do so.

There is also a lot of absence in form of gaps and silence when people speak the dialect. This can be understood if we consider what Cavanaugh (2016) [23] says, that speaking in dialect is a form of violence, because the language is associated with violent acts (Canavaugh 49). Cavanaugh is mostly referring to the Neapolitan novels, but her argument applies to every Ferrante book. The dialect is used to curse, in the dialect, there lies an "echo of the violent quarrels between Amalia and my father, between my father and her relatives, between her and the relatives of my father [...] hearing it provoked anxiety" (Ferrante 21). Anxiety enough to cause in Delia a flashback, to disorient her because it reminds her of the past. In one of the calls Delia receives from her mother before she drowned, Amalia speak "a series of obscene expressions in dialect" (13) and this causes in Delia a "disorienting regression" (13). But we never know what this regression is formed by. Here, we notice a gap in the narrative. I believe this gap is present because simply Delia cannot process the words that are being said in dialect because the laguage is too violent for her, causing a regression to her childhood and a dissociation.

We also notice a gap when, after hearing her mother's obscene expressions, Delia calls a police friend, and when he picks up the call, she astonishes him "with a confused mixture of Italian and expressions in dialect" (14), but again, we never get to know what she says to him. When Delia is recalling a fight she witnessed between Caserta, her father and uncle, she only says that "they had produced in unison a tumult of insults in dialect, a long list of words ending in consonants, as if the final vowel had been thrown into an abyss and the rest of the world were whining mutely in displeasure" (94). But we never know in fact what are the insults spoken.

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[23] R. Cavanaugh, Jillian. "Indexicalities of Language in Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels." *The Works of Elena Ferrante: Reconfiguring the Margins*, edited by Grace Russo Bullaro and Stephanie V. Love, New York, Springer Nature, 2016, pp. 45–70.

When Delia needs to go to a pharmacy, she sees a man next to her and ask him for directions. The man is Caserta but she doesn't know yet. He answers that there is a pharmacy on Corso Garibaldi. Delia thanks him and goes in the direction of the pharmacy, however, she is followed by Caserta's voice, the man changes his tone from a courteous to a threatening one, and Delia is hit by "a stream of obscenities in dialect, a soft river of sound that involved me, my sisters, my mother in a concoction of semen, saliva, feces, urine, in every possible orifice" (19). However, textual evidence seems to contradict this act because Delia turns suddenly to look at the man, astonished by the insults, but he is not there anymore. He disappears. This leads us to think that Delia imagined the last part of this interaction. In this quote, we notice that again, Delia doesn't process the exact words that he is saying, or she processes but is unable to put into words. But with this excerpt we can also take some conclusions about the way she experiences trauma. Her character seems to pay special attention to the tone of his voice and the sudden change in it when it becomes threatening and "more vulgar," as described by her. Then, she is "hit by a stream of obscenities" that make her recall the female members of her family. As she is insulted by this man, the mention of her mother and sister accompanied by "semen, saliva, feces, urine, in every possible orifice" evidences the trauma that the character could be experiencing, as the male character does not really say anything other than the directions to the drugstore, and she interprets his tone as violent not only towards her, but also towards a group of women that are related to her and that she deeply cares about, such as her family.

In this fragment there is an implication of both body trauma and imagination, as some factors of this interaction point to it being either fake or imaginary. First, the mention of bodily fluids and body parts could be suggesting a recalling of gendered violence towards women. She also describes these fluids as being part of a "soft river of sound," which contrasts with the images that she later describes. For this reason, the change of his tone could possibly be only in her perception or imagination, since there are no other indications of him acting violent towards

her. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that the character has experienced trauma that has marked the way that she acts throughout the novel. Moreover, when Delia turns around, the man is no longer there, disappearing suddenly and leaving her to deal with the anxiety depicted in the rapid acceleration of her heart and what she calls a "homicidal impulse." These interactions that may appear simple to the reader, could be demonstrating vividly the trauma that Delia has experienced, as she feels threatened in a normal and short conversation with a man. Her trauma marks the way she interacts not only with other characters, but with the world as a whole.

Indirection

Emma Miller (2018) [24] says that writing about the trauma of sexual violence is not an easy task because this topic "seems to elude the easy grasp of language" (234). The narrative forms available to us fail in entirely capture the experience of sexual trauma, specially if the victim wants to be heard and believed. On the one hand, we have fiction, that as much as it can help in recreating the emotional intensity of the abuse, the fictional text can also be accused of being fake or fantasist. On the other hand we have testimonies but their naked truth can lead to an experience that is similar to trauma, according to La Capra (2004) [25] "the possibility of secondary trauma cannot be discounted" (103). Still, fiction is oftentimes the answer: "Literary scholars and avid readers alike have long recognized that in a social environment so often averse to hearing about the realities of sexual violence, fiction has provided a unique testimonial opportunity without the personally directed censure connected to the narrating of firsthand experiences" (Miller 229).

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[24] Miller, Emma. "Trauma and Sexual Violence." *Trauma and Literature*, edited by J. Roger Kurtz, Cambridge University Press, 2018, pp. 226–238.

[25] LaCapra, Dominick. *History in Transit : Experience, Identity, Critical Theory*. Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2004.

Still, even when in fiction, a sexual abuse might not be openly announced. That's the case of *Troubling Love*. It is only in the end of the book that Delia gathers enough courage to talk about the abuse she suffered with all the words and details and putting herself in the position of had been abused. For the most of the book, she narrates the abuse indirectly as if happening to someone else, in this case, her mother. She still cannot put herself in the story because by doing so, she will have to admit that horrible things happened to her. The first time scenes with the abuser - Caserta's father - appears is not because Delia actively wants to remember it, but the scene come to her against her will. This is, to BenEzer (1999) [26] a trauma signal: a "hidden" event that surface during discussion, "acompanied by distressing emotions such as mourning, grief, shame or guilt which were not previously expressed during the telling of the story" (34).

The first time a scene with the abuser appears is while Delia is in a half-awake, half-asleep state, and she starts by telling herself about her mother: "I slept again but only for a few minutes. Then I fell into a torpor crowded with images, in which, without wanting to, I began to tell myself about my mother" (Ferrante 30) however, when she is describing her mother's hair, she describes how it smells like a brown liquid soap, and that's when she starts to narrate a scene in the basement, when Delia at the behest of her mother, used to went to buy the soap:

> The soap was sold by a fat, hairless man. He scooped it up with a trowel and struck it on thick yellow paper, depositing with it a stench of sweat and DDT. I ran to Amalia breathlessly, holding the package and, with puffed cheeks, blowing on it, to get rid of the odors of the basement and of that man; I'm running the same way now, even though so much time has passed. (30)

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[26] BenEzer, G. "Trauma Signals in Life Stories." *Trauma and Life Stories: International Perspectives*, edited by K. L. Rogers, S. Leydesdorff and G. Dawson. London: Routledge, 1999, 29–44.

Delia's attempt to get rid of the odors of the man signals that something happened in the basement as victims of sexual abuse often feel disgusted with themselves because their body has been touched in inappropriate ways. Also, the need to run away from that place signals that something that caused fear happened. In this passage, we can notice indirection and absence. Indirection because Delia only implies that something happened without ever saying what happened, and absence because after saying that "he scooped it up with a trowel and stuck it on yellow paper, depositing with it a stench of sweat and DDT" (30), the scene jumps to Delia running away, but we never know the reason why she ran away.

After this, we have a clue of what happened in the cellar, but not with Delia as a figure in it, but Amalia: "I suspected that at times my mother, escaping my surveillance, went and dipped her hair straight into the barrel, with the consent of the man in the shop" (31). It seems that Delia used to go to the cellar to clean her hair with the soap, just like her mother did, but in her house. Delia suspects this memory is not correct, because she remembers that her mother used to clean her hair at home, and not at the cellar: "I didn't know how she managed to be in two different spaces at the same time, in the soap barrel in the cellar [...] and meanwhile abandoning herself to the water in out kitchen" (31). The reason why we can believe that it is Delia in the cellar and not Amalia is because in the end of the book, Delia says the images of her mother passing freely though the door of the cellar is a lie because even a kid had to bend down to get through (130). BenEzer emphasizes that the hidden event that surfaces during discussion is sequenced by distressing emotion, and that's what we can notice happening with Delia. After the scenes in the cellar, she feels "a painful embarrassment" (31): "Certainly I had dreamed it that way countless times with my eyes open, as I did now yet again, and yet again felt a painful embarrassment" (31). Delia also sees scenes like this when she is awake.

In another excerpt, Delia gives more details of what happened in the cellar, again, as if it happened between her mother and Caserta: "Then Caserta arrived and opened the iron door, and they went down together to the cellar. Here my mother loosened her long black hair and that

abrupt movement filled the dark air smelling of earth and mold with sparks" (84). Then she describes what they used to do: "they both lay down on the floor on their stomachs and crawled along, laughing" (84) and that "they touched each other between the legs" (85). Delia then goes on describing several details of that cellar: "there were vents, with nine bars across them and a fine-mesh screen to keep the mice from getting through" (85). How does she know so many details if she was not the one there noticing it? "Children, on the outside, stared at the darkness and the wells of light, imprinting noses and foreheads with the grid pattern of the screen" (85).

We can notice that by this time, in the middle of the book, Delia still cannot talk about her abuse, and she does so in a fragmented way, bits and pieces of memory appearing gradually. After recalling this scene, she feels like crying: "Meanwhile, I distracted myself, in order not to cry" (85). Again, memories followed by strong feelings.

Another way that Delia uses to talk about the abuse indirectly is through metaphors using candies. Caserta's father was the owner of the *pasticceria,* and in the cellar, he used to produce the sweet goods he used to sell. Delia used to go to the cellar to eat candies, so much that she says: "Antonio's grandfather did not make a move to hinder me but hoped to get revenge on Amalia by making me die of indigestion, stuffed myself with candies, with licorice, with cream scraped from the bottom of the bowl it was made in" (85). It is popular knowledge that child abusers offer gifts like candies or something that attracts the kid in order to gain the confidence and like from their victims. In this regard, Caserta's father might have used the excuse of candies to attract Delia to the cellar, also, she might use the metaphor of candies to refer to the times she was abused, since she cannot say with all the words that she was being abused. Delia uses candies as her psychological euphemism. It is important to remember that a lot of Delia's flashbacks involve senses like smell, and in those flashbacks, the smell of candies is pervasive. Leading us to believe that candies were involved in the scenes of abuse, either because Caserta's father offered candies to her, or either because the environment smelled like candies.

In another scene, Delia is eating candies while Caserta's father is working: "He ignored me as he worked. I felt pleasantly invisible. I stuck a finger in the bowl of cream, I ate a pastry, I took a candied fruit, stole some silver sugared almonds" (79). She eats candies right before Antonio appears and opens the door to the cellar: "until Antonio appeared and gestured to me and opened, behind his grandfather, the door to the cellar" (79). That's when images of her mother and Caserta start to appear "From there, from that place of spiders and mold, emerged a hundred times in a row and in a few seconds, Caserta in a camelhair coat and Amalia in her dark suit, sometimes with hat and veil, sometimes without" (80) but Delia closes her eyes, in order to avoid those memories: "I saw them and tried to close my eyes" (80). The candies were offered right before the abuse. What this passage also suggests is that Antonio was with her in the cellar, witnessing the abuse or being abused as well. Here, again: indirection. The scenes is the cellar happening between her mother and Caserta, not with herself.

Repetition

Repetition comes in form of flashbacks and images of her mother that will interrupt the flow of the narration. Delia's narrative is not linear because it constantly goes back to a past evoked by triggers from the present. About this non-linearity within trauma narratives Greg Forter (2014) [27] says:

> "It (trauma) erupts unbidden into consciousness not in the form of a narratable story, but as intrusive, belatedly experienced, and achronological memorial shards (flashbacks, nightmares, image-traces, and so forth) which can remain "true" to the traumatized event only insofar as they are not sublated into conventional linear narration" (71)

During her mother's funeral, Delia hears the name Caserta and she instantly becomes

[27] Forter, Greg. "Colonial Trauma, Utopian Carnality, Modernist Form." *Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory*, edited by Michelle Balaev, England, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, pp. 70–105.

apprehensive because this name is a “threatening sound from childhood” (18), “a pure agglomerate of childhood fear” (18). She doesn’t know yet but this is only the beginning, Delia is back to Naples, the site of her trauma and much more unpleasant memories will be evoked, followed by discomfort. After hearing the name Caserta, Delia sees her mother, as if an apparition: “I saw my mother, her legs spread, as she unhooked a safety pin and, as if they were pasted on, removed some bloody linen rags from her sex; without surprised she turned and said to me, calmly, “Go on, what are you doing here?”” (19). This vision makes Delia cry. Throughout the story, Delia will see her mother constantly, as a ghost that is back to haunt her. In those images, her mother is always suffering, observe:

> Amalia now was sitting on the toilet and watching me closely while I removed the hair from my legs. I coated my ankles with hot wax and then, groaning, pulled it away from the skin, with a decisive gesture [...] I put the waxing cream on her, although she tried to shield herself. I spread the wax carefully on her ankles, on the inside of her thin thighs, her groin [...] Then I peeled off the wax while she observed me impassively. I did it carelessly, as if I wanted to subject her to a painful trial, and she let me, without saying a word, as if she had agreed to the trial. But her skin didn’t resist. It turned fiery red and then immediately purple, revealing a network of broken capillaries. “It doesn’t matter,” she said, “it will pass,” while I weakly reproached myself for what I’d done to her. (28)

> Amalia was up there like a nocturnal butterfly, young, perhaps twenty, wrapped in a green bathrobe, her stomach swelled by advanced pregnancy. She lay on her back, and although her face was serene, her body caught in a painful spasm, twisted convulsively. (30)

The setting of this scene in a bathroom - a private, often closed space - amplifies the intimacy of the act. Amalia's close observation of the narrator while sitting on the toilet as the latter waxes her legs sets a tone of vulnerability. The act of watching and being watched increase the tension, as such observations are not merely passive but carry a weight of judgment or

assessment. The narrator's application of wax to her own legs, described with the detail of "groaning" and pulling away the wax "with a decisive gesture," introduces a self-inflicted pain that is both ritualistic and controlled. This personal experience contrasts with the subsequent application of wax on Amalia, where the narrator assumes control over another's body. The strenght suggested by the narrator's careless handling of the wax and Amalia's passive acceptance ("she let me, without saying a word") speaks to a dynamic of domination and submission, where one character endures pain at the hands of another. Lastly, these passages seems to suggest that pain is an aspect intrinsic to motherhood, because even without wanting to, Delia hurts her mother. The image of her mother as a “nocturnal butterfly” is contrasted by a horrible image of her in pain, suffering inflicted on her by Delia in the womb.

Some places in Naples evokes memories. On her pilgrimage through the city, Delia restores some memories that were buried in her unconscious of places she went as a child with her mother. When the train is arriving at the station of Chiaia, she feels unsettled. Then, images of her mother appears:

> She stood there, demanding, in a corner of the old station of forty years earlier. I arranged her better in the background, as if I were working on a puzzle that was not yet identifiable from its details: only her loosened hair, a dark profile in front of three painted wooden figures that perhaps had been there a little less than hald a century earlier, advertising clothes. (72)

When she exists the car, the image of her mother becomes clear, and she feels cold, “in spite of the warm damp air, like that of a greenhouse or a catacomb” (72):

> Now Amalia had definitely appeared in full, young and lithe, in a station that, like her, was no longer there. I stopped to give her time to stand and stare, spellbound, at the figures: perhaps a sophisticated couple with a German shepherd on a leash. (72-73)

Before drowning herself, Amalia calls her daughter. She makes three phone calls and in each one she makes no sense: in the first, she says that she can't tell anything because there is a man with her who is preventing her, then she starts laughing and hungs up. In the second phone call, she profess "a series of obscene expressions in dialect, uttering each one with enjoyment" (13). The third and last phone call comes hours after, Amalia incoherently says that a man is following her "so that he could take her away wrapped in a carpet" (14), then, she asks for Delia's help but quickly changes her mind, saying she doesn't need help and advises "Lock yourself in, don't open to anyone" (14) because the man wanted to harm Delia too and finishes the call telling Delia to go to sleep, and saying she is going to have a bath. These confusing phone calls are the last contact of mother and daughter, and they set the tone of the book: there is a mystery evolving Delia's death and last steps. However, more than setting the tone, the second phone call makes a strong impression on Delia, "those obscenities caused in me a disorienting regression" (14). Later in the book, Delia finds out that the same obscenities Amalia told her were the obscenities Caserta's father, her abuser, used to tell her in the cellar. So that is why these obscenities caused in Delia a regression, those words awoke her abnormal memory related to the trauma. In Judith Herman's (1992) [28] words:

> The traumatic moment becomes encoded an an abnormal form of memory, which breaks spontaneously into consciousness, both as flashbacks during waking states and as traumatic nightmares during sleep. Small, seemingly insignificant reminders can also evoke these memories, which often return with all the vividness and emotional force of the original event. (Herman 37)

According to uncle Filippo, Caserta was Delia's father and his childhood friend who seemed like a decent person but that had eyed Amalia and used to bother all the woman in the

[28] Herman, Judith. *Trauma and Recovery: Aftermath of Violence from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. New York, Basic Books, 1992.

neighborhood, when he went too far in bothering Amalia, Delia's father and uncle Filippo gave him a lesson: "He would't get her out of his head. So we made the desire get out forever" (35). After this, Delia sees blood, cries and insults. She also sees a child called Antonio holding hands with her and both of them going into the darkest part of a basement. After those visions, Delia feels her childhood and adolescence returning to her eyes and ears (36). However, she realizes that, for the first time, after so many years, it was what she wanted (36). This last statement implies that Delia always had those flashbacks and images of her childhood, however, she always tried to push them away, but now, she is finally ready to face them. She is finally walking towards recovery.

When talking about trauma texts, it is crucial to distinguish between narrative memory and traumatic memory so that we can understand the peculiarity of the narration of *Troubling Love.* According to Bessel Van Der Kolk and Onno Van Der Hart (1995) [29] narrative memory is a mental construct people use to make sense out of experience. If that experience is familiar and expected, they are easily assimilated into our mental schemes. If the experience is frightening, it won't be easily apt to integrate into mental schemes and will be remembered with impressive vividness and will resist integration. When in an extreme condition, the existing meaning schemes are unable to accommodate scary experiences, the result is that this memory will be stored differently and won't be available for retrieval under ordinary circumstances, "it becomes dissociated from conscious awareness and voluntary control" (160). However, fragments of these unintegrated memories will later manifest in "recollections or behavioral reenactments" (160). Van Der Kolk and Van Der Hart's description of fragmented, unintegrated memories perfectly captures the narrative effect of Delia's sudden, seemingly involuntary recollections. The traumatic memories Delia shares with us were not assimilated into her mental schemes. That's

[29] Van der Kolk, Bessel A. and Onno Van Der Hart. "The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma." Trauma: Explorations in Memory, edited by Cathy Caruth, The John Hopkins University Press, 1995, pp. 158-182.

why they will keep popping up everywhere in the narration. Those scattered traumatic memories became more frequent in the moment Delia stepped foot in Naples.

When Caserta calls Delia to demand the bag of dirty clothes, we learn that inscribed into the name Caserta lies memories that, considering the way they are narrated, are traumatic ones. Delia talks about how her "less easily verbalized emotions recorded under the word Caserta was a spinning nausea, vertigo, and a lack of air" (34). When describing those memories inscribed under the name Caserta, she bring all the five senses inscribed in those memories. She can see a "dimly lighted staircase and a wrought-iron bannister" (34) as well as "a patch of light striped by bars and covered by a fine screen, which I observed crouching underground, in the company of a child named Antonio, who held me tightly by the hand" (34); In addition, she hears sounds - "like the soundtrack of a film" - "pure commotion, sudden banging, as of things in order that abruptly collapse" (34); she can smell the odor of "lunchtime or dinnertime, when coming from every doorway, the smells of the various dishes mingle in the stairwell but are ruined by a stink of mold and cobwebs" (34); she can taste "sugared almonds in an exquisite candy box" (34). According to Suzanne LaLonde (2018) [30] sensory imprints like the one Delia experiences are common in trauma induced states:

> In addition, in the trauma induced state of dissociation, the thalamus shuts down, which helps to explain "why trauma is primarily remembered not as a story, a narrative with a beginning, middle, and end, but as isolated sensory imprints: images, sounds, and physical sensations that are accompanied by intense emotions. (206)

To Filippo, Amalia was inconsequent because in the past, when gifts for Amalia arrived in the house - fruits, a book of poetry, flowers, *sfogliatelle* and a dress, just her size - instead of

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[30] LaLonde, Suzanne. "Healing and Post-Traumatic Growth." *Trauma and Literature*, edited by J. Roger Kurtz, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018, pp. 196–210.

throwing everything away, she made space for everything in her home and even tried on the dress, something unacceptable to her brother. Her husband found everything and destroyed item for item. It is when Delia has another flashback and subsequently, becomes "afraid" (49):

> Now, for example, I saw the peaches trampled on the floor, the roses slammed ten, twenty times against the kitchen table, the red petals scattering everywhere through the air, the thorny stems still wrapped in silver paper, the pastries dumped out the kitchen window, the dress burned on the kitchen stove. I smelled the sickening odor that fabric gives off when one absentmindedly leaves the hot iron on it. (48-49)

The above passage confirms the hypothesis raised by Andreea Deciu Ritivoi (2020) [31], that "trauma involves senses - smells, sounds and taste - rather than conscious reflection - words or thoughts" (148). But it also confirms another characteristic of flashbacks noted by Dori Laub [32], that of the vividness of traumatic memories: the "explicit details" (61) one can add to memory.

Antonio and Delia used to be childhood friends, and now, he is back to Delia's life. The two of them meet at the Vossi Sister's shop and then go to a hotel together. There, they start to kiss. They start to undress and touch each other. Then, Antonio opens Delia's robe to touch her breasts, however, her body is numb, and she only feels a slight pleasure. Delia knows what she is supposed to do during sex, that she is supposed to masturbate Antonio, however, she feels no impulse to do so. Sex for her is a protocol, she is only waiting for Antonio to ejaculate. At the same time, she starts to feel embarrassed because of the "copious liquids" (91) spilling out of her, something that happens to her often: "Even when as a girl I had tried to masturbate this had happened. The pleasure spread warmly, without any crescendo, and immediately my skin began

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[31] Ritivoi, Andreea. "Affect." *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma*, edited by Colin Davis and Hanna Meretoja, Routledge, 2020, pp. 141–151.

[32] Laub, Dori. "Truth and Testimony: The Process and the Struggle." *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, edited by Cathy Caruth, United States, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995, pp. 61–75.

to get wet" (91). She describes a tension in her body and being left "worn out and unsatisfied" (91) after trying to touch herself. Sex with Antonio for her is "compliance without participation" (90), at a certain point, she is not even sure anymore if Antonio is touching her, because she "had lost every sensibility" (92). When the sexual climate starts to cool, Delia asks Antonio to turn the light on again and she says: "I didn't want to be seen and didn't want to see him" (93).

Delia and Antonio's sex scene is a peculiar one, but it can be understood better if keep in mind that Delia was a victim of sexual abuse so sex for her has a lot of . The numbness she feels, the tension stored in her body, the compliance without participation, the inability to reach a climax, to feel pleasure, the liquids spilling out of her, the fact that she is left worn out and unsatisfied and at the end seems ashamed and does not want to be seen are characteristics observed by Bessel van der Kolk (2014)[33] in victims of child abuse: "Victims of childhood sexual abuse may anesthetize their sexuality and then feel intensely ashamed if they become excited by sensations and images that recall their molestation [...]" (85). Van der Kolk also describes that if the survivor is forced to discuss their abuse, their blood pressure may increase and their heart race (85), which would explain the liquids spilling out of Delia's body, she sweats so much that Antonio, with his shirt, "began do dry my face" (93). The author also talks about how the feeling of helplessness that follows abuse is stored in the body as muscle tension (311) and that victims experience numbness and might try nonhealthy ways to cope with it, such as drugs and alcohol (311).

While with Antonio, Delia keeps having flashbacks, (82) so vivid that she sees Caserta in the face of Antonio, "the impression was so intense that I even thought of telling him, right then, in the dark, what I saw crowding around his face, which was so different from the puffy and thuggish face he had showed me all morning" (93). Delia remembers the violence they witnessed

[33] van der Kolk, Bessel. *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. London, Penguin Books, 2014.

as a child, more specifically, the day her father found out that Amalia and Caserta were seeing each other secretly in the cellar. Amalia was chased along the corridor, down the stairs, through the street. Here, again, the senses: as Delia recalls the past, she smells in Antonio the "odor of oil paints" (93), her father's smell. Amalia was caught, "punched, slapped, kicked" (93), and when she tried to speak, she was struck again. Uncle Filippo joined Delia's father in the chase for Caserta and they were followed by Amalia afar, who screamed "Don't kill him, he hasn't done anything" (94). Delia was following her father and uncle, observing everything, which is why she is capable of giving so many details to the scene, she remembers what her father and uncle were wearing, what they did, what Amalia said, and so on. When Filippo and Amalia's husband caught Caserta, they pushed the man downstairs, they grabbed Caserta by the hair and smashed his head against the banister, leaving him unconscious. Then, Filippo took his brother-in-law by one arm and dragged him away calmly: "he did it because otherwise my father would have left Caserta dead on the floor" (95). Besides Delia, another kid witnessed everything, Antonio. "We had in common only the violence we had witnessed" (93). Delia gaves up having sex and go home. She leaves Antonio behind feeling "compassion for the child he had been" (95).

The last place Delia visits in her journey through Naples is the store who used to belong to Caserta's father, there, Delia will finally recall one core traumatic memory from her childhood, one event that although forgotten, manifests itself in her gestures, in her uncanny reactions to sex. Delia is at the pastry shop that is now abandoned, however, some parts of it are still the same, parts that Delia can recall with impressive details: "I kept going beside the wall of the building. I found the vents for the cellars. They were exactly as I remembered them: rectangular openings a foot or so from the pavement, each with nine bars across and covered by a fine screen" (121). Delia is looking at a specific point, from the bottom of the stairs that leads to the courtyard, and she starts to have flashbacks: "I had a view decades old that wanted to show me more than I could now see. The story, shattered into a thousand incoherent images, struggled to correspond to stone and iron" (129). Delia remembers that after finding out about Amalia and

Caserta, her uncle and father started to beat Caserta, and that the man only stopped fighting when uncle Filippo grabbed Antonio, Caserta's son by the ankles and dangled him from the fifth floor, menacing to let him go. Here, we learn about the importance of going back to the place of your trauma as a way to overcome it. According to Van der Kolk and Van der Hart (1995)[34] action is needed for integration, "successful action of the organism upon the environment is essential for the successful integration of memories"(175). When Delia is revisiting the site of trauma, now with the power to do whatever she wants to, she says: "But the violence came to an end now, wrapped around the railing of the stairway, and it seemed to me that it had been here - here and not there - for forty years, screaming" (129).

Delia spent a huge part of her childhood imagining things, imagining what her mother did when she left the house, imagining what her parents did when they were in their bedroom - a place she wasn't allowed to enter - imagining what her mother was feeling, imagining who her mother was, and now, at the basement of the pastry shop, she starts to imagine what Caserta and her mother used to do in the basement. However, she notices that her imagination has too many details, as if they were not product of imagination but have happened in real life. She starts to feel pleasure and fear at the same time. So, at a certain point, she has to admit to herself that what she was imagining actually happened to her:

> So at a certain point I had to give in and admit that the man who said to me "Come" at the bottom of the three cellar steps was the seller of coloniali, the dark old man who made ice cream and sweets, the grandfather of little Antonio, the father of Caserta. But Caserta no: Caserta was certainly somewhere else, with my mother. So I pushed him off and ran away crying. I jumped onto the fragment of floor where my father was, the easel, the bedroom. I reported to him, in the coarse dialect of the courtyard, the obscene things that

[34] Van der Kolk, Bessel A. and Onno Van Der Hart. "The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma." Trauma: Explorations in Memory, edited by Cathy Caruth, The John Hopkins University Press, 1995, pp. 158-182.

> man had done and said to me. I wept. I had clear in my mind the old man's face disfigured by the flush of his skin and by fear. (132)

Delia notices that the obscene things the man said to her years and years ago were the same things her mother said to her in the telephone before drowning herself, and by saying that, she thinks, her mother simply wanted to show Delia that those words could be spoken, contrary to what Delia believed her whole life. This passage calls our attention to the unspeakably of trauma. If one cannot talk about it, one cannot make sense of it and cannot overcome it. After Delia can profess those obscenities, she starts her path toward healing, as we will notice in the end of the book, she has no curiosity anymore to center her life around her mysterious mother figure: "I had asked myself why my mother had decided to die in that place. I would never know. I was the only possible source of the story: I couldn't not did I want to search outside of myself" (137). She sees Caserta in front of her but she has no need to speak to him. It seems that Delia finally regained her life, she is ready to tell her own story, not the story of her mother.

One last aspect that helps us to envision Delia's healing and reconstruction is the fact that at the basement, she finds her mother's clothes, and then she wears her mother's blue suit, which after some repairs, fits perfectly on her. About this symbolical act of wearing her mother's clothes, Sambuco (2012) [35] states:

> At the end of her reconstruction Delia decides to wear the blue suit, rationally choosing to emphasize the similarity with her mother that she had refused throughout her whole adult life and that appears evident to her when she can picture how the patriarchal structure had separated daughter from mother. (146)

The book ends with Delia on the beach where her mother's body was found, now, she has

[35] Sambuco, Patrizia. *Corporeal Bonds*. Canada, University of Toronto Press, 2012.

no wish to discover why her mother chose that specific place to die. She is the only source of that story and she will never know why, “I couldn’t nor did I want to search outside of myself” (137).

Conclusion

For this last section, I hope to answer some questions I raised in my introduction, questions that I am confident I can answer now based on everything that has been said about *Troubling Love.* Firstly, how does Ferrante conceptualize trauma in the novel?
Ferrante conceptualizes trauma as a deep-rooted and unspeakable force that shapes the protagonist's identity, relationships (the mother and daughter relationship is an example), and how she interacts with and sees the world. There is no aspect of Delia's life that was not altered by the violence she witnessed and suffered as a child. There is no Delia without her trauma, at least not until she gestures toward recovery.

What effects of trauma can be seen in the characters of the novel? First and foremost, silence. Neither of the characters who were affected by violence can talk about the violence they suffered. This includes Delia, who only after her mother's death starts to talk about it, Amalia, Delia's sisters, Antonio, and even the women who are harassed on the bus, they suffer in silence. On top of that, we have Delia's issues with memory, her life story is a confusing mix of memories, memory gaps, and detailed flashbacks in which her mother inhabits her place. Her memories are not complete, oftentimes, there is a gap in what she narrates. Trauma also exerts its power in the relationship between mother and daughter, making it an estranged relationship without intimacy and with jealousy, uncertainty, fear of Amalia disappearing, hate, and a constant attempt to distance from the mother. We have also dissociation and disconnection when Delia is faced with triggers that remind her of her trauma.

When it comes to the city of Naples, what role does this setting play in shaping the traumatic experiences of the characters? The city of Naples is a violent place where violent acts take place, it is a city that oppresses and harasses, where a woman will have to deal with a man

approaching her against her will in a crowded bus, where a woman will hear indecent things as she walks alone on the street. Also, we cannot talk about the city without talking about the dialect, which is how violence reaches the ears of Delia, it is a language that echoes all the violence of the place and its citizens. The city and the language carry violence.

In what ways does Ferrante's narrative style and structure reflect the psychological impact of trauma on her characters? Considering that trauma shapes Delia's life, her narrative also cannot escape from trauma's effects, her narrative is non-linear and marked by repetition in the form of memories and flashbacks that interrupt the flow of the narration, it is also marked by absence in the form of silences and gaps, Delia's narrative is in a way, non-reliable because she is the only one that speaks about the past, everyone else is silent. The gaps in the narrative are noticed when Delia simply doesn't record certain things that are said using the violent dialect. One last aspect of the way trauma shapes the narrative is through indirection, whenever Delia cannot talk about what she suffered, she puts her mother in her place, she also uses metaphor to communicate the violence without naming it abuse.

How do gender and socioeconomic status intersect with experiences of trauma in Ferrante's novel? *Troubling Love* depicts a female protagonist navigating a patriarchal society where gendered power dynamics play a significant role in shaping her experiences of trauma. Delia but also Amalia encounter various forms of oppression, including domestic violence and sexual harassment that limit their agency and autonomy. These gendered power dynamics intersect with experiences of trauma, exacerbating feelings of vulnerability. On top of that, the fact that Amalia is a working-class woman also needs to be considered because this limits her access to coping mechanisms to deal with trauma.

In this last paragraph, I want to put *Troubling Love* into conversation with Ferrante's literature. One of the author's most notable strengths is her portrayal of female experiences. Through her characters, Ferrante navigates the complexities of womanhood, exposing the ways in which gender dynamics shape individual lives and relationships. *Troubling Love* comes to show how those gender dynamics transform the lives of Delia and Amalia, creating intricate marks that cannot be easily erased and how those marks resulting from gender violence have the power to influence someone's life forever and almost irrevocably. Ferrante's exploration of trauma is another hallmark of her literature. She doesn't avoid the darker aspects of human existence, instead diving deeper into the depths of emotional turmoil and psychological upheaval. However, Delia shows that this agitation sometimes is necessary to project you into a different and more fulfilling path. Through fragmented narratives and committed prose, Ferrante exposes the wounds that stay beyond the surface, inviting readers to bear witness to the pain and resilience of her characters. Delia shows that the path to recovery might be hard, but it is worth it, and it is the only way you can achieve all your potential. But also that it is possible to live a life among wounds, although not an easy task. Lastly, at the heart of Ferrante's literature is a profound sense of intimacy. Her novels feel intensely personal as if the characters are confiding their deepest secrets directly to the reader. Delia shows that even though opening the door to your psyche leaves you vulnerable, it is better to face your demons than to pretend they aren't there because the past always comes back to haunt you. Also, Delia's intimate narrative allows readers to see that wounded people are everywhere.

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Vita

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